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New Home-Visiting Program to Benefit Young Asthma Sufferers

It wasn't monsters in the closet that kept the 7-year-old Helena boy awake at night. It was the wheezing, the coughing, the struggle to breathe.

Fortunately for him, a fairy godmother came to his home – and to his rescue.

Michelle Much, a nurse with the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department, visited the boy's home as part of a new public health program that began this summer. The asthma home-visiting program sends trained nurses into the homes of children ages 0-17 to help them and their families find ways to reduce exposure to the things that trigger asthma attacks. The program is open to families in Lewis and Clark, Broadwater, and Jefferson counties.

"The point is to teach families how to make their homes as safe as possible for their children," said Marylis Filipovich, program manager. "We also try to teach the kids skills that will help them have an active life with asthma."

An example, she said, is that the program will provide free "asthma-friendly" mattress and pillow covers. That proved to be the charm for the 7-year-old boy.

"His mother says he hasn't wakened at night since getting the mattress and pillow covers," Much said. "They were really pleased that they could provide him with so much relief for no cost and so little effort."

The program provides:

- Up to a year's worth of home visits from a registered nurse who can answer questions about the causes, triggers, and treatment of asthma;
- A home assessment to identify and mitigate potential asthma triggers, like mold, pet dander, and tobacco smoke;
- Medication advice;
- Asthma educational materials; and
- Referrals to community resources.

The program is funded with a \$26,000 grant from the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. The Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department is one of only three sites in the

state to receive such a grant, along with the Missoula City-County Health Department and Bullhook Health Center in Havre.

Local health officials hope to enroll 15-20 families on a first-come, first-served basis. There is no cost for the service.

The prevalence of asthma is rising sharply in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Nearly one in 12 Americans now has the disease, and health officials aren't sure why those numbers are growing. Researchers are investigating several potential causes, including exposure to various allergens, traffic exhaust, pesticides, plastics, obesity, and diet.

What health officials do know is that there are measures people can take to control the wheezing, coughing, chest tightness, and breathlessness that are characteristic of asthma. These measures include avoiding asthma triggers, recognizing early signs of asthma attacks, and correctly using prescribed medicines, such as inhaled corticosteroids.

A 2004 study reported in the New England Journal of Medicine found that home-visiting programs can successfully reduce unscheduled emergency room visits and school absences related to asthma.

"The key to the home-visiting program is in its name," Filipovich said. "You can talk to your doctor about your child's asthma, but your doctor can't actually go to your home to look for ways to control it."

To find out more about the asthma home-visiting program, call the health department at 457-8964. More information about asthma is available on the department Web site, www.lewisandclarkhealth.org.

The Lewis & Clark City-County Health Department's mission is to improve and protect the health of all Lewis & Clark County residents.

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